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ABSTRACT

English composition teachers in community colleges encounter a wide range of writing abilities and problems in their classes and must provide a great deal of individualized attention to assist students in mastering the process of writing. If teachers of writing are to be able to carry out their designated commitment to literacy for students, others in the college must make the same commitment. Administrative support must be provided through a teaching load that is cost-effective, but that also provides a realistic opportunity for teachers to help their students meet their goals. Writing centers, where students can drop in for various kinds of aid, also represent another successful kind of support. A third, and very important means of support is a college-wide consensus about writing expectations and commitment to writing improvement in all courses. Miami-Dade Community College's activities provide numerous examples of this kind of commitment to student literacy. One example is the college's revised general education program, which stresses the development of fundamental skills. Another is the effort to develop articulated language arts curricula, so that students profit from a continuing, rather than fragmented, language arts experience in high school and college. Faculty seminars to help instructors from all disciplines learn to reinforce writing instruction provide a third example. By including basic skills competencies as fundamentals of education, Miami-Dade has committed itself to enhancing the literacy of its students and to meeting diverse student needs. (KL)

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COMMITMENT TO LITERACY: ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY FOR EXCELLENCE

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One of the requirements of living in Miami is to get used to bugs. Despite careful cleaning and regular spraying, a particularly ugly animal who insists upon sharing my home is one called locally a Palmetto Bug. But it's a kind of cockroach. So I was only a little taken aback when I received this paper--- "How to Kill a Cockroach on the Ceiling"---because these animals are so prevalent. The paper was Paul's response to a standard writing assignment in freshman composition classes: the process paper.

> "The first thing you do, is find an unsuspecting cockroach that is buzzing around and waving its tenticuls on the ceiling. Once you have located the little hairy varmint. You slowly and carefully aroach it. It is helpful if it has setted on one spot. You will have to wait until it stops walking around on your ceiling. After it has found a comfortable spot, slowly take your shoe off, and if you are not wearing shoes use the closest thing that you can throw. Take very careful aim and in an upward thrust motion throw the shoe at the criter. When you see that your shoe has made contact, you yel out, "Shit, I've got it!" But make sure that you are not directly under the spot were the roach might land. After hitting it and it is now wigiling upside down on the floor you strike it, until it stops wigiling. Then you would get a tissu paper and use it to pick the roach. Then walk to the nearest toilet and send it out to sea."

If "literacy" to you is limited to conventional spelling, you would immediately respond negatively to "tenticuls" and "aroach" rather than "approach" (though I rather like the Freudian slip) and even to "yell" being spelled with one "l." Or, you might note that Paul has written a number of sentence fragments--parts of sentences that don't contain complete ideas. Sometimes writers deliberately use sentence fragments for special effect, but I'm pretty sure Paul didn't use the fragments purposely.

Jennifer is in the same class as Paul this term. She wrote about her annual family picnic in response to an assignment that students in the class explain a family custom or tradition. This paper, like the other one you have, was directed to other members of the class as the audience for the writing.

> "The annual family picnic of my large Italian family is an exciting affair. There is so much activity going on that one hardly knows where to look first!
>
> The food alone is a phenomenal sight, ranging from tempting hors d'oeuvres to scrumptious desserts. The most popular dessert is my Aunt Pat's aptly named "zitcake", which consists of a moist, velvety, chocolate cake filled with sweet chocolate bits and chewy nuts, all topped off with a thick layer of rich, creamy icing. Of course, there are some traditional Italian stand-bys such as the tantalizing cheeze-laden lasagna, spicy salami and pungent cheeses.
>
> After gorging ourselves with this delicious food, we begin a marathon session of bocce ball, an old Italian game that is a favorite among my older family members. It is played by two teams of two players each on a long dirt court. The object is for each team to throw its heavy wooden balls closer to the small "target" ball than the opponents can. I believe that watching this game is more fun than playing it, especially when the inevitable argument breaks out over whose big ball is closer to the little ball. Italians can be very expressive when debating such life or death issues. There is frantic shouting, hand-waving, and head-shaking. Eyes bulge, faces redden, and clouds of dust rise from the bocce court as irate uncles and great-uncles stamp their feet for emphasis. In this contest where fairness is not always first, the most stubborn party always emerges victorious.
>
> The highlight of the afternoon is when we pose for the family photograph. After about twenty minutes of arranging and re-arranging our fifty-odd bodies, and amidst much giggling and shuffling and shushing, the cameraman yells "Mozzarella!" and there we are immortalized on film."

Both Paul and Jennifer have passed an initial screening which directed them to the first required language arts course at Miami-Dade Community College. Neither student has the same kinds of writing problems. And both papers are different from the one Carlos wrote in another of my classes--also on March 24 of this year--that begins: "The way how some students behave in my class creates at least on me some kind of skepticism about them."

All these three students are beyond the level of developmental or remedial classes. Certainly all of them exhibit some sophistication in handling written language and in their ideas. In English or Communications classes, each student would get the kind of help he or she needs. Carlos needs to become more familiar with English idiom and stop translating from his native Spanish. Paul needs help in mastering the conventions of the language which he obviously understands and can use with ease. Jennifer, on the other hand, will work on such sophisticated aspects of writing as tone and style.

Naturally, none of these three people is going to be at the same place in their writing at the end of ten or twelve or sixteen weeks-- any more than each is writing the same way at this point in the term. If each of them is impelled to work at his or her own writing, each may make some changes in the remaining month of class. But that change may not be readily evident. Nor may the change even show up until after they've left this particular class. Writing is like that. Progress is rarely smooth or regular. Learning is cumulative and individual developments need to "settle in" on a person.

If you remember learning to drive a gear shift car, and if you were anything like me, you had trouble getting the gas pedal down while you let the clutch up and the car inevitably lurched or jerked or stopped completely. My father was very patient with me and just when I was sure I'd never learn to drive, he told me that there were plateaus of skill acquisition and that one day I'd progress from the plateau on which I'd been stuck. Of course that finally happened, and eventually I learned to drive the car.

Writing is like that. Students sometimes seem to be hopelessly stopped at one plateau of writing skill. But with patience and perserverance, they can eventually move ahead.

Within the profession of teaching writing, there has been considerable research over the past ten years or so on the composing process and, more recently, on revision. Our colleagues are trying to find out how people write, how they go about getting and developing ideas, working out those thoughts on paper, and examining that writing with an eye toward making changes that will improve what is said and how it is stated. As a result of this growing body of research, the emphasis in teaching composition has shifted from the product to the process. In other words, instead of red-pencilling "a theme," after it is written, or zeroing in on errors in spelling and punctuation and lack of transitions and then penalizing students for those errors, teachers have a research basis that can help them be more effective. As a consequence, in general they are spending time helping students while people in the classroom are engaged in the writing process. A composition class is likely to be a noisy place, as students read and respond to each others' works in progress, and as the instructor moves from student to student discussing, pointing out passages, cajolling, helping each individual in the room.

Obviously, a teacher who has 150 students as a workload is not going to have the same amount of time to spend with each of them as the teacher who has 75 or 80 students. I am not talking about the out-of-class time the teacher of writing needs to spend reading student papers or even conferencing--merely what is humanly possible during teaching hours. It's hard enough to individualize the teaching for Paul and Jennifer and Carlos if they are three of 75; it's more than twice as hard if they are three of 150!

If teachers of writing are to carry out their designated commitment to literacy for students, others in the college need to make that same commitment. We need the help of the administration in many ways. One is in a teaching load that is cost-effective but is also realistic for teachers to help students reach

the goals that the college wants its students to attain.

One of the most successful kinds of support for student literacy--for reading and writing help, in particular--is in writing centers where students can drop in for various kinds of aid. It may be simply for clarification of an organizational problem a good writer encounters or it may be for more serious and long-term problems that require faculty as well as peer tutor assistance. We teachers need the help of the college administrations to set up and keep going such a resource that is easily accessible to students for many purposes, not just for 3-credit hour courses. Call them writing centers or writing labs or learning support centers--most colleges seem to have them by now. And it may be that such writing centers are undervalued or underutilized, for each can readily become a center for literacy for the non-academic community, for all school levels, and for business in the area the college serves through offering many kinds of workshops, seminars, and colloquia.

The administration that supports student literacy (and the excellence that implies) will help students toward literacy by making its achievement a college-wide goal. No skill as complex as writing can be improved in a vacuum. Every English teacher has had the experience of a student comparing a composition grade with a grade on some piece of writing for another course. What we usually hear is something like, "You're too picky. My other teachers don't care how I write, as long as I give the right answer." I don't think my colleagues in other disciplines are quite so uncaring as to accept just anything. On the other hand, I do know from experience that without discussing writing criteria, we don't always agree on acceptable standards for writing. Some colleagues are incensed by misspelled words and are convinced that anyone who can't spell things right is an absolute dolt. Empty writing, that devoid of ideas, is more acceptable to some than writing where all the periods and commas seem to be right.

I'm not too much bothered by such differences of opinion, although surely I wish we could talk together and come to an understanding about writing expectations. And with everybody's busy schedules, we need to depend on a central administration to provide the time and encouragement for people in various disciplines to have that talking time.

What does bother me, however, is the notion that writing should be taken care of in English classes because social science or economics or accounting or electronics has so much content to give students that the teachers can't be bothered having them write. Writing does take time. It takes time for students to write in class--longer than it does to take multiple choice tests. And writing does take time for teachers to read; much longer than it does to send in a batch of cards for machine scoring. But the message students get when they aren't asked to write in all their courses is very clear: writing only matters to those fussy English teachers and they can't be very important people because they're the only ones in the school that expect us to be able to write.

Fortunately, more and more teachers in disciplines other than English are realizing that writing is important. The latest "buzz words" are "writing across the curriculum" or "writing intensive courses" or some similar designation. This is a heartening shift. For writing is, after all, a way of thinking. The famous line, for which I've heard varied attributions ranging from Alexander Pope to W. H. Wuden, is "How do I know what I think until I see what I've written?"

Administrations that support writing throughout their curricula are also making a commitment to student literacy. But, like all commitments, it requires tangible support, not just words. No writing across the curriculum program can work unless teachers in all disciplines accept the notion that writing is important. They need to work with English composition specialists to be sure they are not working at cross purposes. That requires workshops,

released time, on-going monitoring systems, drop-in writing centers (especially for students not enrolled in English classes)--a mutually supporting effort. Again--that takes time and money. Again--English teachers--writing teachers--need to get their go-ahead from the college administrations. It's frustrating to be ready and willing--but not able--to do a job because of matters (and money) over which you have no control.

Every sensitive administration knows that writing or communications teachers cannot work miracles--that it takes time to help somebody learn to write well or to communicate effectively in speaking or to be a critical reader. Teachers need the college to communicate such information to the community. The college will be listened to; the individual teacher carries no weight. When the college sends the message that it values literacy, the community will have to respond because obviously it wants students to achieve, to be able to meet the college standards.

"Bring and brag" sessions at conventions such as this one grow tedious. My experience with them at conventions of English teachers is that if everyone were doing at home what they say they're doing when away from home, the world would be quite a different place.

On the other hand, my training as a teacher of writing reminds me always to be specific, to give examples. Moreoever, in my role as writing teacher, I constantly admonish people to write--or speak--about what you know. Therefore, I'd like to share with you, as examples of the commitment to literacy I've been talking of just now, some experiences I have had during the past several years at Miami-Dade Community College.

As most of you probably know, Miami-Dade is now putting into effect a revised General Education program that has been several years in the making. My own involvement has been with developing competencies for both the Communications and Composition courses, with teaching both those courses, with chairing a

seminar of faculty about to teach the Communications course and editing the resulting Faculty Resource Notebook, and with the writing aspect of the other four required core courses.

From the beginning, one of the five common themes of the General Education curriculum has been Improvement of Communication Skills. The College's curriculum committee and the President and the President's Council adopted the following principle:

> All faculty share the responsibility for assisting students in improving their reading and writing skills by giving assignments when appropriate, by reinforcing the importance of these skills, by pointing out deficiences, and by directing students to faculty who can provide the assistance needed.

Of the six general education goals which formed the basis for the curriculum revision now being instituted at Miami-Dade, one addresses fundamental skills and two of the goals in fundamental skills are these:

1. The students will be able to speak, listen, write, and read competently and in an organized and critical manner.

2. The students will be able to communicate effectively with individuals in the different aspects of their lives.

Those two goals are specifically designated "the responsibility of all instructors and should be addressed in an appropriate manner in all courses."

Another of the goals in the Fundamental Skills category is this: "The students will be able to use systematic, critical, and creative processes, drawing from knowledge of appropriate disciplines, to identify problems, analyze alternate solutions, and make decisions." Obviously, a tall order. But, obviously, too, a view of literacy in its broadest perspective.

There is not time here this afternoon to relate the details of the process that led from the formulation of the college-wide goals I have just read to their institution in our ENC 1131 and ENC 1132 courses. But there are three aspects of the course development that may be of interest because they illustrate relationships between Miami-Dade and the state academic community

and the College and Dade county.

While our Communications-Composition Core Course Development committee was working--and eight people had partial released time from teaching for more than a year to work out the courses--the Florida legislature decided to test the basic skills of students aspiring to the junior year in the state university system. The skills to be tested are Communications (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and Computation. The test will be known as the CLASP test (College Level Academic Skills Program) and passing it will be required for an AA degree in the state community college system. Fortunately, we were well along in work on competencies in all four Communications areas at the College, and our considerations and responses from faculty members were shared at the state level. It was not difficult, then, to dovetail our own course competencies with the statewide competencies.

Another group that our Communications-Composition Core Course Development committee worked with were the Dade county high school English teachers, specifically through our county language arts consultant and the high school English department chairs. Early in our planning, we examined the county reading and composition competencies for all grades, but particularly those for grades 7 through 12. Later, the committee met with the high school department chairs and the language arts consultant in groups small enough and informal enough that we could have conversations about our expectations for the students. The college committee was particularly interested in building on the county curriculum so students could profit from a continuing, rather than a fragmented, language arts experience. But we were selfish, too. We wanted to have some realistic expectations about the students who would come to the College and take this new Communications course.

Additionally, we examined the competencies for the Florida High School Literacy Test, as well as the objectives for the statewide reading and composition testing in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11.

Miami-Dade faculty reviewed the course competencies several times as they were being developed, and the Committee went to each of the four campuses to talk with teachers.

All this course development and faculty involvement took a great deal of time and certainly couldn't have taken place without administrative commitment from the very start--and continuing support for what has turned out to be a long and complex process.

Miami-Dade has put an additional, concrete kind of support into its belief that writing in all courses is important. After the competencies for each of the new core courses were developed, faculty members who would be teaching the new courses participated in seminars to prepare themselves for the curriculum change. Writing teachers met with seminar participants to talk about writing that would be useful to the students--and to allay fears of the faculty members that they were expected to learn how to become writing teachers--in addition to all their other problems. For instance, we were able to suggest writing assignments that wouldn't take much class time and that teachers didn't have to grade but that would give teachers information about how students comprehended classroom presentations. I think we are beginning to convince our colleagues that there are many different kinds of writing that are useful to the students and to them, that writing for a course <u>isn't</u> limited to essay exams and term papers, and that those of us who are trained to teach writing are anxious as well as willing to take the responsibility to train students in writing--but that students will accomplish more if they have reinforcement from <u>all</u> their classes.

Obviously, when a college as big as Miami-Dade undertakes a series of changes as radical as the new General Education program--with its ancillary components in student advisement, testing, and retention--these changes don't come inexpensively or quickly. But I am assured that by including reading, writing, speaking, and listening competencies as fundamentals of an education, the College has committed itself to enhancing the literacy of its students and thus to the diverse needs of a Paul and a Jennifer and a Carlos.

There are Pauls and Jennifers and Carloses in the classrooms of your own schools and thousands of English teachers such as the three of us here today. That you do not directly teach those students does not mean you do not want to support them as much as their classroom teachers do. That's why you are at this conference and in this room today. I hope that this is the beginning of a continuing dialogue of our organizations--the AACJC and the National Two-Year College Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication--and of individual teachers with you and with members of your home communities.

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